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FEMINIST, LINGUISTIC, AND RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE  
REFORM

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of English in Rhetoric and Composition  
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## ABSTRACT

As people become aware that society treats women unfairly, they also perceive related shortcomings in the way that Modern English references women. For example, many have objected to the so-called generic *he*, the third-person masculine pronoun employed to refer to a person of unknown gender, and provided several alternatives, few of which have been widely adopted. Nonetheless, change is evident in the case of *they* becoming an increasingly common solution to refer to a person of unidentified gender.

The intentional reform of the Modern English language, both in the past and present, has been a result of people's reactions to what is often perceived as a bias or a deficiency with what is possible to say given the words at their disposal. The rhetorical significance of reform is profound, and scholars continually broach the subject from the perspective of different disciplines. Explored here are the approaches of three of those fields, feminism, linguistics, and rhetoric; how each reacts to and even influences reform is an important part of the study. What is evident is that, regardless of the particular field, reform remains a force of change, even while it may not be broadly recognized. Further, traditional grammatical rules provide an insufficient means for tackling inequalities in Modern English, and are in part responsible for such imbalance. As such, writers must be aware of the present expectations of their audience and the situation of particular words.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout the process of crafting this thesis about language reform, my own thoughts and beliefs have undergone challenges and even changes of their own, often as a direct result of my research as well as discussions with my committee members, who are Drs. Melody Bowdon, Kathleen Oliver, and Beth Young. My thesis committee advisor, Dr. Young, asked me several questions throughout the semesters that forced me to interrogate myself regarding my own die-hard (so I had thought) conceptions about language. I have come to realize that I had been embracing a traditional view of grammar in such direct opposition to what I argue that I remain astounded that I could have missed the divergence for so long. It took the consideration of my committee to reveal more of the picture and change my erstwhile espousal of grammatical prescriptions solidified in the nineteenth century or even earlier; for that, and for their support and assistance over the years, I sincerely thank them.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## Overview of Reform

Since language has existed, it has been subject to controversies of usage and the desires of individuals who would alter it to suit their wants or needs, whether those of a single entity or of a community. It is a linguistic given that language changes naturally; it is another matter entirely, though, when an individual or a group seeks to reform it artificially. Saying that reform is artificial, however, does not necessarily indicate that reform is always unsuccessful or illegitimate. This thesis investigates several specific methods of language reform and their implications as analyzed by three distinct disciplines. Specific emphasis will be placed on the reform of gender-biased language in Modern English.

For centuries the English language has been subject to controversies over sexism. Whether inherent in its vocabulary or in the specific words chosen by writers, there have existed continuing manifestations of sexism in Modern English, both explicit and implicit; additionally, where there is bias, there will be an opposition to it. Such manifestations are important both rhetorically and socially; for instance, what about an audience must a writer consider while composing? A writer's choice of words will certainly affect how he or she is perceived by those reading. Certainly now, during a time in which so many usage handbooks, such as those of Rosalie Maggio and Edward Good, prescribe the absolute avoidance of gender bias, no writer desiring widespread publication would conceivably want to be found guilty of employing sexist language. Furthermore, if a writer is cognizant of certain words that may be lauded or proscribed by society, such a writer may attempt to reclaim a word through intentional use just as effectively as by knowing which words to avoid. Given such rhetorically significant criteria, the matter of language reform certainly merits further investigation. This is not to say that



handbooks are faultless fonts of absolute knowledge; contrarily, some scholars have drawn attention to handbooks themselves and argue that as such books are written by humans, they are vulnerable to the same errors in judgment that everyday speech may be. Therefore, trusting in them implicitly could be just as much an error as employing sexist speech.

This thesis will focus on reform, rather than natural change, because reform shapes and is shaped by culture at least as effectively as by linguistic evolution. Several different methods could effect reform in English, including pronoun-focused, vocabulary-focused, or language-focused methods, the last employing at least a combination of the former two.

### Disciplines Interested in Reform

I will analyze reform through the lenses of three discrete (though occasionally overlapping) fields: feminism, linguistics, and rhetorical studies. Each field provides distinctive insight into language reform.

Some perspectives of feminism, as represented by such figures as Robin Lakoff, Anna Livia, and Dale Spender, among others, explain why one might wish to reform language. Feminists are interested not as much in describing language as in eliminating gender-marked words. As a linguistic term, the word *marked* refers to “the way language alters the base meaning of a word by adding a linguistic particle that has no meaning on its own” (Tannen 500). Marked words are modified from the original and consequently connote an altered meaning. Thus, feminists suggest modifying or removing words that emphasize sexual disparity (e.g., *chairwoman* or *stewardess*). Feminism has also led to several artificial languages, including Láadan. Chapter 2 will focus on feminist scholars and their work with the issue of language reform.

Linguistics examines how language relates to cultural perceptions. The famous notion of linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, underlies much linguistic scholarship; this mislabeled hypothesis (perhaps better thought of as a construct) elaborates the relationship between a culture and the language it uses. However, unlike many of the feminist thinkers discussed, linguists concentrate on how language is instead of how language should be. Linguistic perspectives on language reform will be addressed further in chapter 3.

Language reform undoubtedly carries with it rhetorical implications: how are language reforms implemented? Rhetoric as it relates to language reform is addressed in chapter 4, and finally, chapter 5 will provide a synoptic overview of the issues covered by the other three fields and discuss their implications for modern writers.

### Motivations for Reform

Calls for reform, then, are not simply suggestions to change grammar but rather to change culture, to change assumptions about words and their implications. Success lies not in forcing a mandatory word restriction or neologism upon people, but instead in changing how people think about words that are used frequently in speech every day. Specifically, the above approaches are employed in times when some particular change is desired for social reasons, in the case of the constructed language Láadan, or even for purposes of esoteric communication, as in the case of Internet-born languages like leetspeak or lolspeak. Whatever the specific motive, there is usually an underlying desire to modify people's perspectives as well as the language they use.

### Media Employed to Promote Reform

There does not exist one single medium that encompasses today's cultural awareness of language reform. In the past, usage handbooks were the prevailing method of disseminating

prescriptions; today, however, one of the singularly most influential media to promulgate linguistic reform is the Internet, both complementing and supplementing its printed predecessors.

Usage handbooks that prescribe specific words and writing styles represent one widespread medium for urging reform, particularly reform to language that might be construed as sexist, though such dogmatic handbooks have existed for centuries and not just for reforming sexist language. Many of these handbooks, Rosalie Maggio's *Talking About People* included, prescribe words to avoid and words to favor in a spirit of fairness to all genders, such as "bartender" in place of "barmaid" or "barman" (58). These prescriptive works also include suggestions to promote gender-neutral language by using such phrases as *he or she* or *he/she* in place of the male *he* as an epicene, or non-sex-specific, solution; the male-as-default approach is a much more common and accepted practice in earlier texts, one that is now often advised against in publication (Good 124). Authors such as Sharon Zuber and Ann Reed caution that all such handbooks are politicized and, in attempting to mediate language usage, in effect may condone and perpetuate linguistic discrimination (518).

### Gender in Language and Methods of Reform

Also worthy of mention is the difference between grammatical gender and gender-biased language based on biological sex or culturally constructed gender: specifically, nominal grammatical gender has little direct relationship to sex/gender dichotomies or continua and thus will only be examined cursorily here. At first glance, it might seem that Modern English is more egalitarian than other languages because it does not possess grammatical gender, unlike German with *der Tisch* (masculine) and *die Katze* (feminine). However, even Maike Engelhardt, who characterizes English as a "genderless" language (6), also asserts that "most words in the English language are masculine unless further specified" (59), a fact that she argues might account for

the previously common and more acceptable use of the generic *he*. Specifically, Engelhardt argues that English demonstrates “androcentricity” because of the widespread use of the masculine pronoun as the unmarked generic (10). Where, then, does gender manifest itself in English? The most obvious example is that of pronouns, as when one substitutes *she* for *the woman*, a simple equation between a noun phrase and pronoun which Alleen Nilsen terms “transparent gender” (2) and what Benjamin Whorf calls “overt categories” in his 1945 article. Perhaps less obvious are idiomatic expressions that associate gender with an abstract or non-human noun, such as “Mother Earth,” “Father Time,” or referring to a boat as *she*.

To remedy English’s masculine bias, three types of reforms have been proposed: pronoun-focused, vocabulary-focused, and language-focused methods. Each author examined fits into one of these three categories.

Pronoun reform focuses narrowly on the smallest (though most ubiquitous) set of words’ in fact, most seek to eliminate the generic use of the masculine pronoun *he*. One common approach replaces the generic *he* with, for example, *he/she*, *he or she*, or *s/he*, although some view multiple-word constructions like *he or she* “ugly and cumbersome” (Baron 83). A second approach substitutes *she* as the generic pronoun. Susan Crowley in “A Teacher’s Introduction to Deconstruction,” for example, uses female pronouns to contrast process pedagogy with Derridian deconstruction; for example, Crowley says, “Rather, such a [deconstructive] reading looks for places in the text where a writer’s language mis-speaks her...” (7). This feminine pronoun highlights Crowley’s contrast with the male pronoun chosen by Derrida’s translator. A third approach uses the plural pronoun “they” to refer to singular antecedents, but as C. Edward Good points out in his grammar handbook, “Under traditional rules of grammar, the two don’t match” (124). According to Judith Weiner and William Labov’s statistical analysis of the pronoun *they*

used in a gender-neutral context, “The choice of a particular generalized pronoun is nearly automatic in many contexts” (34), yet because readers are quick to criticize, writers should carefully consider their options rather than relying on their automatic choice. Because pronouns themselves are small and such common words, many reformers start with them. Interestingly, seemingly small changes to common words (such as pronouns) strongly resist change, while broader changes (such language invention) require less re-learning and rethinking of one’s automatic choices.

Vocabulary reform is larger in scope than pronoun reform, but it still focuses only on a relatively narrow subset of words, or even just one word. For example, in her 1405 “The Book of the City of Ladies,” Christine de Pizan asserts that the word *Lady* (*Dame* in French) refers to a woman of noble character and not necessarily of noble birth. Though de Pizan wrote about French, her ideas transcend language; Alette Hill in *Mother Tongue, Father Time* also objects to the English word “lady” because it implies “a judgment of incompetence” (91). Inga Muscio, in her feminist work *Cunt*, takes up the cause of vocabulary reform by reclaiming derogatory slang to complement her feminist social critique.

Some reformers have proposed renovated languages with entirely new syntax and morphology. Although linguists have viewed such attempts with skepticism (Lawrence Sharpe, according to his 1961 “Artificial Language Projects” states that “most systems of this type are lexical codes which can only serve for rudimentary written communication” [1]), the Internet has helped these languages grow. On the Internet, those who build new languages are known as “conlangers,” a portmanteau of the words “constructed” and “language.” While sites built by and about conlanger groups exist in abundance, they do not inform a significant focus of this thesis. Instead, those language projects that have a documented presence in society will be

highlighted. The Internet and its unique rhetorical structure is responsible for at least a few linguistic reforms, perhaps most notably leetspeak and lolspeak, both of which have developed rules just like any other natural language. Outside of Internet culture, too, artificial languages have flourished: Esperanto and Láadan, as examples of languages designed to rectify perceived problems in natural languages, and fictional languages such as the Elvish of Tolkien's fantasy universe and Klingon of Star Trek fame. If a particular language is founded on the basis of avoiding problems inherent in another language, a writer can certainly ascertain the values of both the creators and practitioners of that artificial project. Láadan, especially, is worth considering since its creation is based upon galvanizing a female-centric language. Others, like Muscio, however, believe that "Creating a general, woman-centered version of the English language ... is just insanely difficult" (xxv). Alan Slotkin echoes Muscio's sentiment in "Media Watch," arguing that "old habits, linguistic or otherwise, are hard to break" (286); in short, he remains skeptical that reform via language is feasible for removing gender bias. Certainly these authors mentioned here are not the only ones to weigh in on the topic, but they represent the primary vying opinions. How, then, might writers be concerned with language-focused reform? More specifically, what could writers take from artificial languages to apply to English? This question will be built on throughout the chapters and addressed in full in chapter 5.

English language reform as discussed above is inextricably related to modern gender issues. Thus, language reform is unavoidably matched with social reform; that is, the former cannot occur without the latter, though whether one directly causes the other is a subject of debate. When the perceptions of enough people change, social reform has occurred. Each of the three focus methods provides input in terms of language reform and its social implications.

Each approach towards reform necessarily creates repercussions for writers. With linguistic and cultural change comes the need to evaluate the rhetorical relationships among text, author, and audience. A writer must be aware of the cultural consensus that might affect social perceptions of a text, and such awareness certainly applies to matters of gender and language.

## CHAPTER 2: FEMINISM AND LANGUAGE REFORM

### Feminist Foundations and Approaches to Language Reform

Modern feminism has its roots long before the twentieth century. Before Modern English even could have been anticipated, women's rights throughout the world, and particularly Europe, were deemed insufficient by several authors over the centuries even prior to the Renaissance.

While a primary concern of many feminists today is often the recognition of the equality among genders and the provision of equal rights to women and men, it is not their sole concern. Feminism now can more broadly encompass the struggle against *any* form of oppression. Since its early beginnings, the word *feminism* has been a misleadingly simple label for the complex set of theories and goals that falls under that umbrella. All labels (including linguistics and rhetoric) imply a similarity of practices that may not exist in reality, but feminism is particularly complex. It does not deal only with women. It does not deal only with women's rights. It is not a single discipline (as rhetoric and linguistics are). Feminists can and do come to many disciplines. Indeed, many of the authors I call "feminists" here are professional linguists or extend their research to that field.

In an attempt to deal with this diversity, some have classified feminism into waves. Through further classification, feminism in general is often divided into the first, second, and third waves, which in turn are often further subdivided by time periods, activity, and goals. The first wave began in the mid-1800s, somewhere between 1830 to 1848, and ended with the women's suffrage movement in 1920 (Heywood 134), though a foundational work to the first wave is Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 piece, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Feminism's second wave began in the mid-1960s, ending "with the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and the advent of the Reagan/Bush era." Finally, while Leslie Heywood argues that



“third-wave feminism has never had a monolithically identifiable, single-issue agenda that distinguishes it from other movements for social justice” (xx), she begins a chronology of the third wave in the early 1990s; these events include the advent of the Clinton administration as well as Rebecca Walker’s 1992 declaration: “I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the third wave” (139). Further, the other “movements” that Heywood mentions encompass issues of gender, race, class, and religion. Third-wave feminism, then, is still ongoing. While the idea of categorizing feminism may seem distinctly antithetical, doing so allows focus when investigating the perspective offered by its many methodologies. Although each of the waves addresses language reform to some extent, language reform dominates second-wave publications during the later decades of the twentieth century.

Many of the feminist authors referenced in this thesis can be conceived of as belonging to what is commonly called second-wave feminism, the period during the latter half of the twentieth century and continuing today that focuses on American societal views of women. It would be too limiting, however, to say that each author here fits within a rigid feminist category (and, indeed, would be distinctly non-feminist to do so). Instead, while a great deal of these authors may adhere to some of the defining social goals characteristic of second-wave feminism, some also build on these feminist foundations to create new theories and goals for more modern concerns, especially when those goals involve a reform of Modern English language. Many of the authors included here are categorized as *feminists* not necessarily because they share a specific ideology, time period, or topic of interest, but because they all represent some of the social desires of various feminist movements. Indeed, many of the feminist authors who discuss language reform are professional linguists or extend their research to that field.

Second-wave feminists' works have often targeted language for reform. The ideas investigated below share a common theme of seeking both to explain sex bias as it is manifested in English and to suggest ways by which English could be changed to avoid this inherent bias, or even investigating whether such intentional changes in language would be an effective endeavor compared to more broadly ranging social changes. Explored below are the three methods of reform as addressed by feminist theorists, ranging from suggested strategies for implementing reform to questioning the usefulness of the methods themselves. Each of these methods, pronoun-, vocabulary-, and language-focused reform, provides a target for reformers, while simultaneously fitting the second-wave concern of linguistic concentration.

#### Feminism and Pronoun Reform: The Generic "he"

Of the three language reform methods previously discussed, pronoun-focused reform receives arguably the most attention and is the most difficult to enact. Such change usually involves the intentional avoidance of sexist reference, including, though not limited to, the use of an *epicene* pronoun: a single-sex pronoun to refer to a non-sex-specific antecedent. Pronouns create an easy target for reformers in their ubiquity, but their widespread use also makes them hardest of all to change as they are ingrained in the mind of English speakers. That is, pronouns are used with such familiarity that the act of consciously changing their usage might prove extremely problematic.

Though pronoun reform is addressed by authors in both feminism and linguistics, sensitivity to pronoun use requires more than knowledge of language. Ironically, James Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* as a linguistic source is an example of an author's use of the generic third-person singular *he*. Culturally, Austin's usage might have been less intrusive to his 1950s audience, though now it appears sexist and serves as evidence for reform. In the specific

cases in which Austin does use *she*, the singular feminine pronoun refers to an antecedent that is the subject of a discussion of beauty; for example, in discussing phatic acts, Austin uses the example, “She has lovely hair” (96). Furthermore, Austin’s discussion of phatics as quotations in novels is one of unmistakable assumption:

This is the ‘inverted commas’ use of ‘said’ as we get it in novels: every utterance can be just reproduced in inverted commas, or in inverted commas with ‘said he’ or, *more often*, ‘*said she*’, &c. after it (96).

Apparently Austin automatically associates novels with feminine pronouns and assumes that his audience does, as well. Such pronoun association is further evident in Austin’s examples that involve one person ordering another to “shoot her” (101-2); such examples of females being portrayed as the victims of violent actions is a topic focused on by Victoria Bergvall in “Humpty Dumpty Does Syntax,” a satire of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. Bergvall’s character “Alice” is a student learning linguistics from the misogynistic professor “Humpty Dumpty,” whose examples of linguistic data all lead Alice to proclaim, “Your examples mean much more than what you choose them to mean. They both reflect and help to construct the culture of which they’re a part” (434-5). In fact, by virtue of when Austin was writing, it is likely his brand of writing that second-wave feminists reacted to.

On the opposite end of a spectrum representing an author’s usage of single-sex language is Lev Manovich in his *The Language of New Media*; nearly every time Manovich describes a generic, unspecific person, he uses the feminine. For example, in discussing a hypothetical video game, Manovich states, “As the player proceeds through the game, *she* gradually discovers the rules that operate in the universe constructed by this game” (222). This pronoun choice is not an isolated occurrence; it is a recurrent one. Manovich never directly references or justifies his use of the feminine pronoun, but it can only be intentional; what remains unclear, though, is the

reasoning behind his choice. Does Manovich feel that his use of the feminine makes up for the years of other authors selecting the masculine? While the reason is opaque, an effect is clear: the reader notices the defiance of both the older masculine convention as well as the epicene, which Dale Spender might refer to as a “reversal of roles,” a “consciousness-raising technique” that serves “as a means of getting beyond the limitations of the language trap” (158). Whether Manovich intended this rhetorical response or not, it nonetheless exists.

Finally, in an example that appears to favor neither pronoun, Anne Beaufort in *College Writing and Beyond* uses the unconventional and rather more epicene *s/he* construction. This usage, besides being an attempt to avoid choosing one pronoun over another, is likely an attempt to acknowledge that freshman college writers, the primary focus of Beaufort’s work, are both males and females. Thus, the choice to use *s/he* as a neutral-reference pronoun is indeed rhetorically significant. However, Beaufort’s choice itself is still marked, and the fact that few choices can be unmarked in Modern English is at least part of the problem that second-wave feminists address.

Modern English usage handbooks, especially ones written and published within the last fifty years, often provide suggestions to either to avoid or continue using the generic *he*, with various politicized justifications. Invariably, though, “Handbook writers see their job as conservation, not invention” (Zuber and Reed 518). Such appeals as claiming that the generic *he* stems from traditions rooted in the “beginnings of the English language” (523) or emphasizing number agreement over gender (526) are employed in order to justify the maintenance of what has never truly been a firmly established norm, that is, maintaining the use of *he* as the generic third-person singular. What such approaches succeed in doing is maintaining gender and class inequities, Zuber and Reed argue (526). Surely, then, *he* is a worthwhile target for reform.

Solutions given for *he*, however, do not all involve calls to switch to another already extant word such as *she* or *one*; in his aptly named article “The Epicene Pronoun,” Dennis Baron discusses reformers’ attempts to introduce a “common-gender” or “bisexual” pronoun into the English language (83). Baron recites a brief history in order to explain the widespread adoption of generic *he*, providing examples from as early as 1814. He also notes that the call to replace generic *he* with an epicene pronoun is “most often advocated and attempted, and the one that has most often failed,” aligning with Inga Muscio’s assessment of overall language reform. Such an analysis as Baron’s possesses rhetorical significance in that people consider using a single-sex pronoun like *he* to refer to a common-gender antecedent as inherent evidence of sexism, but the concept of introducing an artificial solution has for the most part failed. Regarding certain past attempts, Baron presents justifications used by previous authors; in particular, he says, “Although they recognize the inherent sexism of the generic masculine, the Fowlers see no real alternative” (84-5). “The Fowlers,” in this case, refers to H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, who in 1927 argued that *he* or *one* should always be chosen for concision in favor of the presumably grammatically incorrect *they* for singular antecedents or the more cumbersome constructions such as *he or she* (85). Importantly, the Fowlers here recognize that their opinion will be interpreted as sexist, yet still they advocate the position. It is this all-too-common sexism evident throughout much of English’s history that the second-wave feminists hope can be extricated from the language.

While Baron provides a broad overview of epicene pronouns, other authors take up his gauntlet and tackle more specifics. Anna Livia in her book *Pronoun Envy* continues the discussion, first broadly in the context of gender’s occurrence (and even lack thereof) in English and French literature, and then more specifically in the context of “epicene neologisms,” those

precise same words that Baron tackles in his chapter and concludes have failed to enter public English discourse. Livia agrees with Baron in that, “If success is to be measured only by the entry of one of those [epicene] pronouns into daily language, then the attempt has indeed failed.” On the other hand, she notes, “Singular *they* has shown a dogged resistance to the attempts of conservative grammarians to eradicate it.” However, she also emphasizes that “Baron’s own impressive list of [epicene pronoun] contenders is testimony to the depth and longevity of concern” (137) regardless of the low rate of their successful establishment. At one point in her examination of literary pronoun creativity, Livia asserts that Brigid Brophy’s *In Transit* “uses the first person pronoun in order to avoid the clumsy neologism *he/she*” (70). The first-person *I*, then, seems also a viable rhetorical alternative to using words that might be deemed either sexist or ineffective.

While Livia is convinced that epicene constructions, despite their worthiness, are often doomed to fail, others feel more strongly that pronoun reform is a wasted effort even before it begins. Robin Lakoff, for example, is certain that “this area of pronominal neutralization is both less in need of changing and less open to change than many of the other disparities” in English speakers’ uses of language to reflect cultural assumptions (71). She believes that the use of pronouns is so common and ingrained into speakers’ minds that by the time they are aware of any discrepancy between the uses of *he* and *she*, they are better off expending their efforts at reforming other aspects of language and culture. In short, while Lakoff grants that many linguists and nonlinguists feel as if the neutral *he* “makes women feel shut out,” she also asserts that any “attempt to change pronominal usage will be futile” (71). Thus, Lakoff and others who share her sentiments will tackle reform via other methods, most notably with calls to social action rather than linguistic reform.

Consensus, however, is seldom reached. Maike Engelhardt, in *Generic Pronouns and Their Influence on the Speakers' Language Awareness*, argues that there exist both primary and secondary meanings of *he*. The primary meaning “denotes the masculine object or subject in a sentence,” while the secondary “is that of the unmarked generic pronoun.” What Engelhardt emphasizes as important is whether children learn to distinguish between the two meanings, and whether sexism is perceived when that distinction is insufficiently taught (74). To rectify this problem of inadequate teaching, Engelhardt suggests that a rhetorical approach, in which teachers intentionally force students to use alternatives to the generic *he* and then explain how it changes their perceptions, is one possible method, while another approach would be to “change the awareness of the speakers first [through education about the secondary meaning of *he*] and then the pronoun, meaning that education comes before action” (78). This rhetorical approach to the pronoun-focused reform method is explored in more detail in chapter 4.

Perhaps in an attempt to explain the widespread continued use of the generic *he*, Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King argue that a basis for feminist-linguistic theory is the fact that many languages, English especially, reflect an androcentric worldview (59), a common theme also visible in Dale Spender’s *Man Made Language* as well as Alette Hill’s *Mother Tongue, Father Time*. Significantly, Ehrlich and King believe that changing this view is not possible through word choice alone since “the continuing existence of [sexist] structures and attitudes throws into question the possibility of successful language reform” (60). Additionally, Ehrlich and King state that, as a direct result of calls for pronoun reforms, “one might find a decrease in the use of masculine generic forms, but an increase in example sentences that refer to males in stereotypical ways” that might explain a decline in the generic use of *man*, but not a decline in common social

sexist attitudes (62). Like Lakoff, then, Ehrlich and King hint that more than linguistic renovation is necessary to remove the dominance of *he*.

It would be reasonable to argue that reformers' efforts have resulted in some amount of change despite various arguments either that reform is useless or that it is the only way to overcome inequality. Indeed, while each of these extremes might be exaggerated, perhaps it is fair to claim that handbooks possess less clout than they once did. In a 1990 article, Miriam Meyers asserts that "Many speakers and writers ignore the handbook-prescribed generic masculine forms, using instead singular *they* or forms of the *he or she* type" (228). "Indeed," Meyers continues, "linguists surveyed by Leonard (1932) over half a century ago regarded *he or she* as established usage and singular *they* as established in some contexts." As argued by Baron and Livia, Meyers's adds her own weight to the opinion that issues with pronoun reform extend back into the twentieth and even nineteenth centuries. Despite the continual revitalized interest in their reform, "These generic pronoun choices have failed thus far, however, to gain general approval," likely due either to Baron's belief that the generic *he* was taken up for efficiency or to Ehrlich and King's assertion that overcoming the bias of English is too great a challenge for pronoun reform. Additionally, Meyers continues,

Generic pronoun choices have drawn increased attention during the past twenty or so years due to heightened concern about inclusive language. During this time, some advocates for change have ridiculed the excesses of masculine generic pronoun purists, citing such examples as the law that reads 'No person shall be forced to have an abortion against his will' (228).

Such an example of the masculine pronoun as inclusive certainly provides an explicit impetus for change since *he* clearly cannot logically apply in the context Meyers presents.

Ralph Fasold also explores the issues of language and gender in English in his *Sociolinguistics of Language*, also published in the same year as Meyers' work. In beginning to



address the topic, he unequivocally states that “‘generic’ masculine forms do not work the way they are supposed to” (114) in that, as Baron suggests, the generic masculine *he* is meant to be an inclusive pronoun and might be used simply for convenience, but cultural and rhetorical interpretations see the generic masculine as meaning more than convenience: it is instead perceived as a reinforcement of patriarchal hegemony wherein the male is deemed superior to the female.

The myriad methods of changing the generic masculine *he*, from syntactic rephrasing to epicene neologisms, have met with varying success. Neologisms for the most part have failed to become incorporated into everyday speech, but a relative degree of pronoun fairness towards gender has evolved even since the mid-twentieth century, noticeable particularly in prescriptive handbooks. The reality remains, however, that “To change a pronoun in English is hard to do in any case, and in particular in the case of the generic pronoun” (Engelhardt 76).

Pronouns provide a variety of options for reformists; because of such variety, though, there exist few successful widespread implementations of reform. The low success rate thus far, however, has seemingly not dissuaded continuing attempts of writers to distance themselves from the long-standing default of the generic *he*. Arguably, more recent publications have favored alternative constructions, but no single option has seemed to gain widespread support. In terms of prevalence, however, many linguists and feminists have noted the increasing popularity of the singular *they*, even before the second-wave feminists engaged themselves in the debate, suggesting perhaps that, despite prescriptions against it, an epicene solution is naturally evolving in Modern English.

## Feminism and Vocabulary Reform

Feminists, due in part to their close association with linguists, discuss the method of vocabulary reform in relation to both its feasibility and its relation to culture; that is, feminists discussing vocabulary reform ask whether the words chosen directly influence the culture or if the culture is responsible for the set of vocabulary that is available to be used. Invariably, then, the answer to this question will provide the exigence for one's argument.

For decades, authors have given arguments regarding vocabulary reform and its social and rhetorical effects. Many, including Ehrlich, King, and Lakoff, believe that simply changing words will not solve problems, rather that the words are reflections of underlying social problems. These authors insist that past attempts to equalize language through vocabulary have merely preserved the inequality that is present at a deeper, more cultural than a linguistic level. Others, such as Dale Spender, Julia Penelope, and Inga Muscio, maintain that efforts to reform opinions by reforming vocabulary are both plausible and necessary for overcoming what they argue is a male-dominated influence over the English language. Chapter 3 will discuss in more depth the language-culture relationship that these authors draw into their arguments.

Maike Engelhardt makes her opinion clear via the statement,

It is not language that makes women the subordinate category in relation to men, but it is the fact that patriarchy is the prevailing pattern of society and that men are rulers, definers of rules and hold the power to situate individuals in certain spots in the hierarchy (68).

Furthermore, in a discussion of sex bias as it is perceived in English, Engelhardt approaches the topic with an interesting perspective. She observes, "Information about sex bias in language sells well in the advice section of a bookstore as well as in the section for communication studies in a university bookstore." Such an observation attests to the widespread interest the topic generates; in addition, such information "sells even better when it is called sexist language,

because this seems to come across as more violent and degrading, and it appears as if everybody knows who the victim of this sexist language is” (58). Even more importantly, Engelhardt poses the rhetorically potent questions, “Which biological sex is worthier and more frequent in a language and what effect does this have on the speakers of this language?” She suggests that most feminine English words serve as the opposite (and usually unequal) counterpart of the superior masculine word, communicating an overt sexual inequality to the speakers of the language (59). These counterparts include, but are certainly not limited to, such male/female dichotomies as *master/mistress*, *waiter/waitress*, *barman/barmaid*, and *comedian/comedienne*.

Concerning changes to profession labels, Ehrlich and King argue that constructed changes to vocabulary intended to equalize sex bias, such as *chairperson* or *server*, in fact create the opposite effect. That is, those words like *chairperson* and *server* actually “are used in ways that maintain sexist stereotypes and distinctions,” a process that Ehrlich and King discuss as being “redefined and depoliticized by a speech community that is not predominantly feminist and is often sexist” (59). In an example, Ehrlich and King discuss two different department-head titles, one female and one male: the former (female) is given the title “Chairperson of Humanities” while the latter (male) is given the title “Chairman of Anatomy” (63). Rather than rid the English language of sexism, the word *chairperson* here merely indicates that the person is female while the other remains male, the seeming social default. Significantly, then, Ehrlich and King provide evidence that new words or forms of words might only serve to promulgate gender discrepancy in English.

Similarly, Dale Spender’s argument is that “All words ... which are associated with females acquire negative connotations, because this is a fundamental semantic ‘rule’ in a society which constructs male supremacy” by supporting a “systematic pejoration of female terms.”

Furthermore, “The way meaning is created in our society depends upon dividing the world into positive-masculine and negative-feminine” (18). Therefore, words such as *mistress*, *lady*, *chairwoman*, and even gender-neutral words such as *chairperson* or *professional* that are applied to females become pejorative compared to their masculine counterparts. Spender argues that such facts suggest an underlying semantic association in English speakers’ minds of words linked to femininity with negative, often sexual assumptions (19).

On the other hand, Miller et al. are convinced that “The movement to reduce sexism in the English language over the past 25 years has been successful,” with evidence coming from instances similar to those that Ehrlich and King declare have not effaced gender bias from Modern English.

Spender, in *Man Made Language*, is certain that a reform in vocabulary is both a feasible and necessary solution to overcome sexism in the English language. Indeed, she asserts unequivocally that “this bias [which favors males] can be located in the language” (14), as opposed to in the culture as suggested by Lakoff, Engelhardt, and others. Furthermore, “the language – as a system – embodies sexual inequality ... and it is not women who enjoy the advantage” (15); to Spender, then, the vocabulary-focused method of language reform is both feasible and necessary.

Julia Penelope’s *Speaking Freely*, much like Spender before, advocates a strong message of necessary reform, arguing that “Standard English is a lie” and that “those responsible for our linguistic training [rich white men] have made us [anyone not a rich white man] feel incompetent and powerless, forcing us to learn their false version of English and abandon our own social, ethnic, and regional dialects, using the promise of upward mobility to herd us into linguistic

conformity” (xix). Biological sex is clearly not the only issue deserving consideration for Penelope; so are race and wealth, all of which affect the possibility of linguistic reform.

Inga Muscio’s approach reclaims words that have degraded. In particular, Muscio would repossess the word *cunt*, hoping with her book to re-empower the word (and others like it) for women. Such a method attempts not to create, abandon, or otherwise change words themselves, but instead to re-evaluate words’ use, a steadfastly rhetorical practice. Her frankly worded arguments, though at times humorous, outright bawdy, and always blunt, have merit in the discussion of feminist language reform. Quite often, Muscio adopts a conversational tone, suggesting she has in mind an intimate audience of like mind to hers, which frequently makes the work absorbing just as it might be off-putting to one not in agreement with her opinions.

Specifically, Muscio argues, *cunt*, and other modern derogatory terms like it (including *bitch* and *whore*) all share origins as “titles of respect for women, ... or derivatives of the names of various goddesses” (5). The fact that all of these words have evolved (or devolved, as Muscio would argue) into “words which convey negative meanings about women” suggests to Muscio that these words, over time, have been misappropriated by “emerging patrifocal religious and economic systems” since “the containment of woman’s sexuality was a huge priority” to those systems (6). This belief of Muscio’s reflects the evidence given by Lakoff and others that *lady* is following the same path as more derogatory words. That being established, Muscio does not propose to eradicate such words; indeed, as she herself states,

Eradicating a tried and true, stentorian-assed word from a language is like rendering null the Goddess Herself.  
It’s impossible (7).

Instead, Muscio believes, the word must be re-seized to give power back to women and undo the “diabolization” of the word in question. Muscio concludes her introduction by declaring, “And

thanks to the versatility and user-friendliness of the English language, ‘cunt’ can be used as an all new woman-centered, cuntlovin’ noun, adjective or verb” (11). Without comment, too, Muscio employs replacement terms such as “laywoman” (102) and “womanifesto” (177). To Muscio, then, vocabulary reform takes the shape of repossession, suggesting that social change will result from language reform.

Like *cunt*, words such as *bitch* and *whore* have followed a gradual path of social decline. Muscio would most certainly agree that *lady* is on its way down the same path to ruin as those words; Robin Lakoff’s *Language and Women’s Place* contains an in-depth exploration of the term *lady* as related to euphemisms for professional roles, much as Ehrlich and King discuss. Lakoff, however, argues that euphemistic alternatives for the word *woman*, such as *lady*, simply exist as “euphemistic terms for woman’s principal role, that of ‘housewife’” (52). Occupational terms, however, only seem to take euphemisms “when the occupation is considered embarrassing or demeaning.” Lakoff, after a brief meta-discussion, determines that questions of such a nature are “for the sociologist” to consider (52). Moreover, regarding deliberate attempts at vocabulary reform initiated by cultural concerns, Lakoff argues that “social change must precede lexical change,” that attempting to force a change in vocabulary is a futile attempt until societal assumptions can be altered. Her specific evidence for this argument comes from the use of “black” as during the U.S. civil rights movement when the term only gained acceptance after “people other than blacks ... were made aware of their prejudice during the civil rights struggles” (68). Applying the same logic to feminist linguistic reform, Lakoff suggests that

to banish ‘lady’ in its euphemistic sense from the vocabulary of English, we need only first get rid of ‘broad’ and its relations. But of course ... we cannot achieve this commendable simplification of the lexicon unless we somehow remove from our minds the idea ... that women *are* broads (53).

In an elegant metaphor, Lakoff asserts, “A competent doctor tries to eliminate the germs that cause measles, rather than trying to bleach out the red with peroxide.” In short, Lakoff concludes, “Linguistic imbalances ... are clues that some external situation needs changing, rather than items that one *should* seek to change” (69).

The word *lady* is examined in another context in *Mother Tongue, Father Time* in addition to the one already analyzed by Lakoff above. Hill notes that *lady* also manifests itself as a term used “by some men” to mean “a silly tiresome creature” as in the sample interchange:

A: May I ask what you think of Mr. Smith?  
B: I’ll tell you, *lady*. I’m voting for Jim Brown (90).

Arguably here the term *lady* takes on a different meaning than that of an “arbiter of morality” or “judge of manners” (9), though in either case the word is viewed as sexist by both Hill and Lakoff. Hill continues her analysis of the application of non-neutral terms to women in her sixth chapter, titled “Terms of Endearment.” Therein, she avers that such terms are generally used by friends, family members, or by people in other close relationships, “but they are also used on women by perfect strangers” (86), signaling a “nonparallel” usage that Hill argues to be clear evidence for discrimination based on sex. She continues, “Even in intimate relationships, terms of endearment are not necessarily used in a reciprocal fashion, ... where the man remains a Self and the woman, an Other” (94). Hill attributes some of this disparity to nineteenth-century sentiments that considered married women to be literally their husbands’ property, thus suggesting that “their subordinate position is still so widely assumed that names, titles, and terms of endearment reflect this disparity” (94). Thus, to Hill, words and cultural associations are closely linked, and one cannot be changed spontaneously without some help from the other.

Anna Livia extends Lakoff’s principles both in an essay directly addressing Lakoff’s work as well as in her own book *Pronoun Envy*. In the former, she continues Lakoff’s

distinction between men's and women's speech patterns, concluding that "we cannot understand the workings of gender if we consider it on its own, removed from other essential demographics like class, race, and age" ("Picking Up" 148), arguing as Lakoff does that language must be considered as it interacts with culture, not simply as an object that can be manipulated at will. In *Pronoun Envy*, a rather more linguistic enterprise, Livia dedicates a chapter to exploring English neologisms intended to avoid typical gendered inferences. In particular, she dissects neologisms in the novels *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting for You*, and *The Cook and the Carpenter*, all feminist science fiction or utopian fiction. Following several thorough examinations of each book's solutions for avoiding gender-biased language, Livia optimistically concludes that such endeavors "point the way to future developments and show up the inadequacies of the existing system" (*Pronoun* 158), even if they fail to take a widespread hold in the broad linguistic community of English.

Overall, feminism harbors competing opinions when the discussion focuses on the vocabulary-reform method. Despite the lack of consensus, feminist attitudes certainly align with linguistics and rhetoric. The lack of consensus, however, does not indicate any significant rift; in fact, it testifies to the discipline's strength in surviving competing positions.

### Feminism and Constructed Language

Occasionally, reform attempts which focus on one single method may be deemed insufficient; this is particularly the case with the American linguist and science-fiction author Suzette Elgin, who constructed the Láadan language originally for her *Native Tongue* trilogy of books. According to Elgin, it was "several seemingly unrelated activities" that led her to consider that:

- 1) Existing human languages are inadequate to express the perceptions of women.



- 2) If women had a language adequate to express their perceptions, it might reflect a quite different reality than that perceived by men.
- 3) What was being called the "natural" way to create words seemed to me to be instead the *male* way to create words.

This combination of various ideas, in addition to her academic background in linguistics, instilled in Elgin the desire for a completely new and constructed language, Láadan. Importantly, Elgin states that it would have been inadequate to “just insert a handful of hypothetical words and phrases” to advocate her method of reform; instead, she “needed at least the basic grammar and a modest vocabulary” of at least one thousand words in order to have a sufficient amount “for ordinary conversation and informal writing.” To Elgin, then, the more simple method of English vocabulary reform is too slight to cause a rhetorically significant shift of perspective for women. The only way for women to achieve Elgin’s feminist goal of “express[ing] their perceptions” would be to employ this new, woman-centered language, a concept originally tested in Elgin’s science-fiction trilogy which has since evolved into a language on its own, with grammar lessons and dictionaries offered via different media, in various books and Internet sites.

Of significant note in regards to Láadan is the fact that English commonplaces are effectively reversed in terms of gender; that is, all words are considered female or gender-neutral unless they end in the bound morpheme *-id* to signify masculinity. Furthermore, this suffix tells a great deal about Láadan and Elgin’s justifications behind constructing it. In Láadan’s creation, Elgin has at some level reversed the sexism responsible for justifying her desire for a woman-centered language. Despite her argument that “women are not superior to men ... or equal to men, but rather entirely different from men,” Láadan is nevertheless based upon English and all of its cultural expectations and perceptions. As such, one who wishes to learn Láadan today still must possess fluency in English and of necessity see that Láadan reverses the common unmarked

gender assumption of male as default. Furthermore, in a society that includes both women and men, language cannot reasonably be limited to use by only one sex; that is, despite Elgin's desires and efforts to create a woman-centered language, once the language becomes public, any member of a community is free to use it (Cuellar 149). Therefore, it is relevant to question whether such a method of reform is viable for changing society's perceptions.

Nevertheless, now that Láadan has come into some form of use, those who use it contribute new words to its lexicon just as with natural languages. (Of a particular note is Julia Penelope, who has on Láadan's official website contributed several acknowledged vocabulary words.)

Láadan is certainly not the sole constructed language developed by women for women, as it were; it is, however, most noteworthy for being not only a pioneer but also a success as far as activity in use, despite Elgin's declaration of failure regarding her Láadan "experiment" and Arika Okrent's assertion that "Láadan never really took off." The fact that even today new and updated editions of Láadan dictionaries are being published is a testament to its survival.

This above exploration of methods under the purview of feminism represents but one specific approach to the analysis of language reform; the following chapters will each address a different approach, linguistics and rhetoric, specifically. Within each discipline, as with feminism, exist specific focal points of interest that inform different authors' opinions and around which groups of authors will tend to congregate, allowing ordered and relevant examination of the primary areas of current interest in language reform.

### CHAPTER 3: LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE REFORM

Of the three fields whose foci are relevant to this study of language reform, linguistics is one that offers the most technical and sociological data. The field is one especially qualified to examine the various sounds and structures that make up human communication. In fact, it is linguistics that gives us the terminology we use every day to talk about the way we talk; pronouns, vocabulary, and artificial language projects are included in this discussion.

Linguistics is a broad term referring to many sub-disciplines and areas of study, including, but not limited to, computational linguistics, historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, and semiotics. All of these fields and subfields are concerned primarily with description, not prescription; that is, they are concerned with how language is, not how it should be. Thus, as members of a predominantly descriptive field, linguists, and especially sociolinguists, often find their concerns overlapping with those of cultural and anthropological studies.

Unlike the specifically feminist approaches discussed previously, the linguistics discipline is more passive in the area of language reform. That is not to say that linguistics is a passive field; rather, in regards to language reform, linguistics and its practitioners are generally known for taking an observer's perspective, attempting to document rather than influence change. In this investigation of language reform, however, it is difficult to separate clearly the specifically feminist critiques from the strictly linguistic observations, as few authors comment on the issue in general without an explicit opinion or argument regarding reform's validity or usefulness. Like these feminist theorists, though, linguists provide an ample amount of information in the area of intentional language reform. As mentioned previously, too, many of the feminists discussed above overlap the linguistics discipline, providing valuable insight into the technicalities of language and reform.

## Linguistic Relativity and Linguistic Determinism

Influential in the pursuit of knowledge about language reform is the construct known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, variously (and more usefully here) encompassing two principles termed linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism, both of which provide contexts for relating cultures, the languages they use, and the relationship between the two to influence those cultures' perceptions of reality.

Linguistic relativity, also known as the weak form of the Sapir-Whorf construct, is the belief that culture directly influences language; language under such a purview, then, becomes secondary to a culture. Language is interpreted as an effect of the society that uses it. Lakoff, Fasold, and Livia support such an interpretation of the relationship between language and culture.

On the other hand, linguistic determinism, or the strong form of the Sapir-Whorf construct, calls for the opposite: any culture's language influences its worldview. In their adamant support of and belief in vocabulary reform, Spender, Penelope, and Muscio necessarily operate under the assumption that linguistic determinism is the social norm; that is, by changing the words a culture uses, the culture will thus undergo change.

The concepts of linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism, also known as the weak and strong forms of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, respectively, have been and continue to be focal topics to sociolinguists and other humanist scholars and researchers. This concept also serves as the basis for more than one artificially constructed language. Livia in *Pronoun Envy* asserts that

Contemporary feminist interest in the search for epicene third person pronouns and the avoidance of gender markers stems from the same basic belief that the language one speaks directly affects one's worldview (11).

Further, Livia continues:

discussions of linguistic determinism are becoming obsolete among linguists. This does not mean that notions of linguistic determinism have disappeared entirely from the popular realm (13).

Livia's argument regarding the obsolescence of linguistic determinism echoes Ralph Fasold's, which claims that the Modern English language is strictly a reflection of the culture that uses it since the natural biological order of female-as-default is "so thoroughly reversed that the resulting perception of reality is built into [the Modern English] language" (Fasold 115). Interestingly, Fasold's evidence also supports the arguments of feminists such as Lakoff and Livia who believe that the male-as-default pronoun choice is a linguistic reflection of an inequity in society.

Linguistic relativity and determinism do not, however, have to form a dichotomy, despite the synoptic appearance of the existence of only two groups of consensus; instead, some argue, a compromise between the two is both possible and the only practical option. Given the fact that not all cultures share either a common worldview or language, the complex relationship between the two remains a significant focus of sociolinguistic study, yet not an all-encompassing one. As Mary Talbot summarizes the relationship, "I think we probably need to negotiate a position somewhere between the two" (14) in order to gain an adequate understanding and appreciation of the interplay between language and culture. Instead of one shaping the other in a direct causal relationship, perhaps culture shapes language that shapes culture.

As a result of this complex interaction between language and social norms, it becomes apparent that no method of objective research exists that can sway favor to one side of the debate. Indeed, John Lucy cautions that the "linguistic relativity hypothesis," used by him synonymously with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, is not easily tested empirically and thus neither conclusion should be so easily accepted. In particular, Lucy discusses three separate empirical

research methods he says have been used to test the linguistic relativity hypothesis in natural language, citing several famous linguistic studies such as Benjamin Whorf's study of the Hopi language and Berlin and Kay's study of color categories across languages. Helpfully, Lucy attempts to outline the benefits and downfalls of each method and discusses the effect the studies themselves can produce on interpretations of the relationships among language, culture, and the connection between the two. The fact that even the studies themselves produce disagreement within the field is evidence enough to support the claim that research on the topic is notoriously problematic.

The exact relationship between linguistic relativity and determinism is by no means certain, but it is clear that the two have a close interaction. Perhaps the most reasonable answer so far to come out of the debate is Talbot's assessment that the two are intrinsically connected, suggesting a reflexive chain in which a change in one produces a change in the other in a constantly fluctuating, bidirectional cycle.

### Linguistics and Pronouns

In their various assessments of pronoun reform in English, linguists attend to empirical research as well as research from other disciplines to produce any conclusions. In these cases, historical linguistics and sociolinguistics are primary describers of both the past and more recent changes to occur to pronouns.

Thomas Pyles and John Algeo, in their history of the development of the English language, provide a detailed account of the evolution of pronouns. The most significant change, at least in terms of Modern English, came in the transition between Old and Middle English. A defining characteristic of this transition to Middle English is that many of the complex distinctions in the language, for example, adjective endings and noun inflections, underwent

significant simplification. English as a collective of dialects had lost most of its inflected gender distinction, yet pronouns retained, and still do retain, the most complexity of all the traditional parts of speech, Pyles and Algeo argue (155). Despite the relative complexity, however, simplification still occurred. Dual (a distinct number from singular and plural) was phased out, and in the later Middle English period, many of the forms with which we are familiar (including *they* and *them*) had gained prevalence. Furthermore, many of the separate forms for each case and gender collapsed into forms that encompassed multiple cases and genders (156).

Pronoun reform, distinct from evolution, offers fertile ground for linguistic studies, as has been addressed at least partially in the above discussion from attempted epicene and neologistic reformation to the role reversal of *he* and *she*. Baron's exploration of the epicene pronoun, for example, represents a linguistic approach to the concern of the avoidance of the generic *he* as discussed above as a feminist interest. Specifically, though, he evaluates certain specific attempts at adopting epicene pronouns into Modern English and why, for various reasons, they have failed. Among many examples, the most notable that Baron discusses are *thon* (from *that one*), which he argues influenced "a flurry of word creation" in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, and *he'er*, both of which neologisms made it into various editions of dictionaries but were later dropped as they failed to enter popular parlance (87). This failure lends credence to the proponents of linguistic relativity, as these arbitrarily created pronouns never saw broad adoption and thus became artifacts as culture moved on without them.

Not every neologism is a failure, however. Elaine Stotko and Margaret Troyer's recent study of a new epicene pronoun in Baltimore, Maryland shows that not all attempts have been dismissed or overlooked. Their study, conducted in 2004, documents the rise of the third-person

epicene pronoun *yo* used among middle- and high-school students. Further, they explicitly refer to Baron's work as a foundation for theirs (263). Unlike Baron, however, Stotko and Troyer present a successful implementation of an epicene pronoun that defies his listing of more than 200 years of failed reform attempts. In addition to casual observation of the pronoun's use, the authors undertook empirical data gathering including elicitation interviews to support their claim that this pronoun indeed occurs in speech (263).

Of further note with epicene solutions is the difference between speech and writing. It is of note that many English users will employ different words in their spoken intercourse from words in their writing. Zuber and Reed note the importance of the differences between speech and writing for epicene pronouns, where in the former medium, even "many educated speakers" will use constructions including the singular *they*, while in the latter, these same educated speakers "will avoid or notice" the same constructions (522). This fact, Zuber and Reed assert, "stems from the role of linguistic authority in the writing of the educated," an authority that handbooks attempt to preserve and that many, including several feminists discussed here, would have done away with. Zuber and Reed argue that the best solution to overcome sexism and linguistic conservatism is the introduction and acceptance of a "truly epicene singular pronoun," and their conclusion is that the singular *they* fills that need by being "the most natural candidate" (520). That is, unlike the epicene pronouns outlined by Baron, singular *they* is already frequently used despite prescriptions and proscriptions, and it is not an arbitrarily invented word coined to fill a the perceived need for such a pronoun. Mark Balhorn even argues that the use of *they* as a singular epicene solution dates back at least to the fourteenth century (80). Nevertheless, despite a growing recognition that the singular *they* may already be the English epicene pronoun, few are willing to explicitly accept it for fear of legitimizing what has long been proscribed as an error.



In her discussion of attempts at pronoun reformation, Lakoff argues that culture, rather than individual words like pronouns, must undergo change before the language can follow, clearly a relativist approach. Lakoff, then, distancing herself for a moment from the overtly feminist argument of her book, states that “linguists should be consulted before any more fanciful plans are made public for reforming the inequities of English” (71). Though Lakoff tackles the issue of forced attempts to forego the use of the generic *he* in particular, her statement as a linguist is easily applicable to language reform in general, including vocabulary.

Fasold, as mentioned previously, also suggests that the male-as-default perception of pronouns is literally unnatural considering that no known species exists in biology for which the male is biologically (chromosomally) unmarked; that is, represented in writing, a female’s genetic chromosomes are XX while a male’s are XY, or specially marked. Transferring biological markers to linguistic ones, Fasold contends that *she* instead of *he* would be the likely generic singular “if language reflected the natural relationship between the sexes” (115). Granted, this interpretation places emphasis and reliance on the authority of modern science, which feminism has often challenged. Clearly, though, language to Fasold does not reflect common scientific conceptions of nature and is instead purely culturally constructed and perpetuated.

Various linguistic evaluations of pronouns and pronoun reform suggest that linguists fall back to the debate of relativity and determinism, often attempting to situate a study in the framework of that dichotomy as Baron, Lakoff, and Fasold do in their studies.

### Linguistics and Vocabulary

A primary focus of linguistics on modern vocabulary reform exists in the realm of Internet-born words, acronyms, and phrases. As the Internet experiences the most constant

variability and is subject to global linguistic influence, it offers a fertile domain for empirical study.

The proliferation of the Internet and the rise of new media in computer technology provide a wealth of new information, as well as new ways to parse that information, for linguists interested in language reform. Kris Axtman in a 2002 article on Internet language addresses the rise in use of abbreviated jargon (what Axtman terms “Net lingo”) as found abundantly in text and instant messages, especially among teenagers. This unique reformation in vocabulary of the English language is hardly a phenomenon restricted to younger generations, though this is the demographic on which Axtman places his emphasis. Regardless of whoever is most prone to employing it, however, Axtman summarizes its import by arguing, “To some, it's a creative twist on dialogue, and a new, harmless version of teen slang. But to anxious grammarians and harried teachers, it's the linguistic ruin of Generation IM.” While this latter statement betrays some of Axtman's own anxieties regarding the change in vocabulary brought about by abbreviations such as the now not-so-novel “lol” or “t tyl,” it also accurately demonstrates two predominant opinions about language reform: one passive and accepting, the other more conservative and resistant. Axtman and others see this new vocabulary as a reflection of laziness and underlying negative social change that is merely brought to the surface by “Net lingo.” Axtman's view, then, is one of linguistic relativity: the increasing ease of access and interconnectedness of culture even across large geographical distances via the Internet is rubbing off on language, influencing its vocabulary and use. Despite his view of relativity, though, Axtman clings to the prescriptions of “correct” and “incorrect” grammar that have for so long dominated and stifled writing; because of net lingo, he argues, teens' “grammar is becoming atrocious.” Socially, Axtman is stuck in an antiquated paradigm; the perils of the Internet provide a rhetorically suggestive backdrop for his

article, evident in both his resistance to the reform of vocabulary offered by “Net lingo” as well as in his concluding adage of a teen who wisely (it is implied) cuts off an online acquaintance who “uses profanity.” Nevertheless, Axtman’s overview of modern word change provides an important discussion of linguistic reform.

Due also to the rapidity of flux enabled by the Internet, it is noticeable that Axtman’s article has become antiquated by the fact that he provides definitions for terms that have become rather commonplace, not merely unique to the exclusive social circles of high-school teens. That words like IM, lol, brb, etc. have become so ordinary is a testament to the success of this particular linguistic reform. The shortening of phrases into more wieldy words or acronyms is certainly not a recent practice, but many evoke particular emotions in addition to the simple words they replace, like “lol” for “laughing out loud,” which three letters can have a host of associations, including amusement, sarcasm, annoyance, or virtually any other connotation that can be given to the actual human action of laughing. Many of these words under Axtman’s umbrella of “Net lingo,” then, represent new, shorthand means of committing an intangible thought or action to writing.

Most often, changes in vocabulary occur when the need for such language arises, prompting words to describe new concepts or technologies, for example. Axtman’s focus is on the language of Internet communication, a bountiful area of creativity in terms of vocabulary for Modern English. As these network technologies evolve and develop, new terms are continuously added to English’s vocabulary to describe them, demonstrating an effective symbiotic relationship between language and culture.

## Linguistics and Artificial Language

Of particular interest to those who study language are auxiliary, artificial, or constructed languages, all different terms referring here to the same concept: languages devised with specific intentions including (though by no means an exhaustive list of motivations) overcoming foreign-language barriers for ease in international communication, providing a means of communication meant to be understood by only select users, and adding depth and user interaction to elaborately constructed fictional mythoi. Artificial languages have been created and maintained since at least the Classical period, with various rates of success and failure for each language over the centuries (Crystal 354). The most successful of these various attempts at the language-reform method is arguably Esperanto, which has in turn been argued to be a natural language due to the fact that “several children have had it introduced to them as a mother tongue” (354). Despite the success rates of these languages, however, it remains both linguistically and rhetorically relevant to give them attention and examine their possibilities as well as the effects they have produced.

This section will provide examples and linguistic analyses of the varied approaches towards comprehensive language reform, with examples of such projects being Internet languages and completely artificial languages such as Esperanto and J.R.R. Tolkien’s Elvish. An investigation of such projects will reveal motivations for language overhaul. Axtman, Dash, and Lastowka and Hunter each have insightful offerings on various forms of language that have been born of the Internet, and Elizabeth Kirk and Alfred Johns have arguments regarding, respectively, J.R.R. Tolkien’s Elvish language and Esperanto, each an artificially constructed language. It is important to note that several of the sources previously mentioned, Lucy specifically, note that their research is applicable only to natural languages and not constructed ones.

Electronic languages, of which leetspeak and lolspeak are examples, are a unique and relatively recent development in the timeline of constructed languages, due at least in part to the rise of the Internet as a dissemination medium for those languages' generation and continuation of existence. Also included in the category of electronic languages are coding languages, including machine code such as assembly or C/C++, which are languages interpreted by compilers to perform actions within a computer (computer-computer interaction), and so-called markup languages like XML or HTML which are closer to user-interaction-level languages interpreted by Internet browsers and styling programs to output specific displays on a user's screen (human-computer interaction). In any case, these languages adhere to vocabularies and grammars which, if violated, can produce unexpected or invalid results, just as in languages used in human-human interaction. Each form of electronic language possesses a different flexibility for reform, and some even rely on reform to exist in the ever-fluctuating paradigm of computer-science studies.

Certain instances of new languages or electronic dialects exist almost solely for the purposes of idiosyncratic communication that are inscrutable to outsiders of the speaking community (Dash). Of particular note in this category are the languages known as leetspeak (one of many spellings to represent it) and lolspeak. Both were born of online communities made up of people spread across the globe, and both exist in a constant state of change; furthermore, both stemmed out from the tree of Modern English and exist now as distinctly recognizable variations. These languages, too, exist as examples of active linguistic determinism; that is, the mindset of those who use the languages is informed by the use of the languages themselves, as will be shown.

Leetspeak, a widespread Internet language found particularly within the online gaming community, was the subject of a recent (2005) sociolinguistic study in an Australian university, in which student participants from a “Gaming Fundamentals” class were observed behaviorally as they participated in discussions regarding the subject of leet language. The study’s results indicated interestingly that, despite many of the participants’ derision towards users of leetspeak, many in arguing about it digressed into a hierarchical behavior of those with experience with the language exercising self-importance over those with less familiarity (in leet terminology, the “pros” over the “n00bs”). Such hierarchical distinction demonstrates some degree of cultural determinism at work in that usage of the language actually affected the participants’ view of it. Technically speaking, leet or 1337 began at its core as a code in which numbers or symbols stood for letters in English, though it has since developed with its own vocabulary and loose grammar. Due also to its widespread use, this Internet language is in constant flux, thus making attempts at cataloging a translation index of leetspeak generally ineffective (Blashki 80). Some participants whose discussions the researchers cite categorize leetspeak as a new dialect of English, while others see it as its own language altogether. One example of a student’s use of leetspeak in discussion included the phrase, “1|=| Ou |{4N r34|) t|-|15t|-|3N| Ou i5 t3|-| |\_337 [if you can read this then you is teh leet]” (82), an example that demonstrates many of the primary characteristics of the language, including character substitution, intentional subject-verb disagreement, disregard for traditional English orthography (such as capital/lower-case letter distinction or the use of K instead of C), and leet-specific vocabulary (“teh” and the word “leet” itself).

Similar to leetspeak, lolspeak was created for the purpose of indiosyncratic communication through what are called “image macros” (Dash). Significantly, what makes the language found in these macros actually language-like are the facts that it evidences consistency

and one can be judged to use “incorrect” lolspeak. As he develops his argument, Dash contends that this artificially constructed lolspeak is most akin to a natural pidgin language. Complexly, due in part to its genesis on the Internet, lolspeak at times can draw on leetspeak (terms include “enuf,” “gtfo,” and others), demonstrating the complex interchange experienced by Internet languages. The success of lolspeak as an esoteric means of communication has even led to its appearance in an article in the *Wall Street Journal* and to its adoption as the basis of a programming language (dubbed LOLCODE) to be executed by compiling and parsing programs.

Languages like LOLCODE introduce a relatively new purview of linguistics, and at least intersect with computational linguistics. Machine languages follow rules like natural languages, and as such they can be understood to possess grammar, syntax, and vocabulary and can be intentionally revised or modified. Programming languages (of which LOLCODE is an example) and markup languages (such as XML and HTML) are unique species of language, both because they themselves may well be considered languages which can be reformed and because they exist as channels of communication between humans and machines. Reformation for machine languages, though, seems more possible than natural change, as the adherence rules for such languages is generally strict and requires intentional modification in order to be changed (as HTML is a modification of XML), effectively making the possibility of unguided evolution impossible.

In a separate category from machine languages are human languages that have existed as solutions to language-barrier issues include Esperanto, Ido, and Interlingua, to name three of the most successful in terms of numbers of speakers (Crystal). Edward Sapir, partial namesake of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, was himself directly involved in the development of Interlingua.

A final category of artificial language to gain a community of speakers is that of fictional languages, including languages created as part of fictional universes, notably Elvish and Klingon, or as thought experiments in language, much as Suzette Elgin's Láadan is. Elvish, its creator might argue, could be considered as both.

J. R. R. Tolkien believed that languages are only partially defined by their grammars and lexicons; the other part comes from the culture associated with them. As a result of this belief, Tolkien declared that languages like Esperanto and Interlingua were "far deader than ancient unused languages, because their authors never invented any Esperanto legends" (Carpenter 446). Thus, Tolkien considered his own languages, including Quenya and Sindarin, among others, to possess more viability due to their relationship to the intricate mythos he devised.

Another example of a fictional language that has enjoyed relative success is Klingon of the Star Trek mythos. In accordance with Tolkien's opinion, Klingon does not simply exist without a context; it rose to prominence due to its existence as a fictional culture replete with history and mythology, the indicators according to Tolkien of a living language.

Sharpe's "Artificial Language Projects" provides a worthwhile if relatively outdated (in terms of its existence prior to the Internet) survey of some constructed languages from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the purposes for which they were commissioned. In spite of its datedness, Sharpe's article still provides a relatively useful synopsis of previous and ongoing language projects, including classifying them as *a priori* or *a posteriori* languages; the former describes a language that is "completely arbitrary," while the latter describes one that is "modeled on living or ethnic languages" (2). Sharpe also designates a third category of artificial languages, what he calls "mixed systems containing both arbitrary and borrowed elements." Even after these distinctions, however, he concedes that no artificial language can be either



completely arbitrary or completely patterned on a base language. The former is true, he argues, because all languages, even artificial ones, are patterned on known language. The latter is true because “no artificial language ... avoids arbitrary lexical or syntactical features,” even when such languages may be simplified forms of natural languages with no artificial lexicon.

No matter their source or intended use, many of these languages have become so widespread, in fact, that in Google’s language tool options one can find the option to select Esperanto, Hacker, Interlingua, and Klingon, among other natural and artificial languages of the world (“Language Tools”). In particular, the “Hacker” option displays the familiar Google home page and its subpages translated into leetspeak (mostly accomplished by simple symbolic replacement with relatively few other “actual” leet conventions, though the fact that it is selectable as a language remains indicative of its pervasiveness nonetheless).

Linguistic discussions of artificial languages are diverse at the very least. From fantasy Elvish, to sci-fi Klingon, to mechanical XML, constructed languages offer linguists several unique opportunities for exploring this reformation method. Not only is description a core element to such an analysis, but these analyses also offer valuable sociolinguistic insight into the motivations for reform in Modern English, including the desires to transcend national borders and extend the communication capabilities between humans and the increasingly complex technologies they employ.

## CHAPTER 4: RHETORIC AND LANGUAGE REFORM

Rhetoric has a long and often convoluted history, both as a discipline and as a word, so what is meant here by *rhetoric*? Despite its sundry and often divergent definitions, it is important to note that rhetoric, in all its incarnations, has been a significant factor in public affairs, according to Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg in their synoptic *The Rhetorical Tradition* (1). Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile to choose a single definition for the sake of grounding the reader with a referent. To Aristotle himself, rhetoric is “defined as an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion” (37). This very narrow definition of the discipline as an ability to recognize a specific, achievable end—that of persuasion—is certainly valuable, but far too narrow. To modern entities like university composition programs, rhetoric embodies the relationships among text, authors, audiences, and situations, and how a change in one of those elements necessitates a change in the others. By rhetoric, then, I mean to invoke the contemporary definition assigned to it by so many university English departments today as a complex, situational model, a product of its long and winding history from the time of the Aristotelian philosophers of Ancient Greece.

Rhetoricians who adhere to the above constraints of rhetoric are concerned not necessarily with the motivations or technicalities of language reform, as feminists and linguists are, respectively, but rather with the effects such reform may produce on an audience.

The field of rhetorical studies provides a great deal of insight into language reform; each specific selection of a word is important to a rhetorician in how it might be connected to and construed by an audience. Indeed, since the time of Classical rhetoric in Ancient Greece, rhetoric has been acknowledged to be the discipline that has as its subject matter the different methods by which language is produced, disseminated, and used in all other practica (Aristotle).

Even in the modern age of digital media, authors not affiliated with rhetorical theory provide valuable insight into the rhetorical context of new media, such as the Internet. Mike Krahulik and Jerry Holkins, authors of the webcomic *Penny Arcade*, demonstrate the influence of rhetorical theory on popular culture in a piece titled “Green Blackboards (And Other Anomalies),” wherein the equation “Normal Person” + “Anonymity” + “Audience” = “Total Fuckwad” is presented. In this example, the authors offer their commentary on the notoriety generated by members of the online community, wherein people who behave acceptably in face-to-face social situations deviate in their interactions with other people through the medium of the Internet due to a rhetorical shift in context (their access to anonymity). That is, given anonymity and an audience, a person otherwise well-situated socially can exhibit unacceptable social behavior without fear of personal consequence and will occasionally act upon that opportunity. Significantly, this “Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory,” though perhaps crassly named, exemplifies the pervasiveness of rhetorical theory in mainstream media, and also the recognition of that theory. More recently, several websites have emerged that connect users randomly with one another. In 2009, a website named Omegle was launched, affording users the ability to join a randomly assigned chat with a stranger. Several news media outlets and blogs provided opinions within the site’s first several months of existence, citing “pros” such as its free access and cross-platform compatibility and “cons” such as one reviewer’s experience, in which they were “offered Crack and then cursed at with plenty of F’s showing up in [their] chat window” (“Omegle”). Similarly, in late 2009, video chat website Chatroulette generated similar popular interest, with one New York Times reviewer documenting his experience with the site as “an unnerving world where you are connected through webcams to a random, fathomless succession of strangers from across the globe” (Bilton). After describing several entertaining as well as

disturbing random encounters, Bilton continues with a description of the growth in popularity of the site, with a 1000% jump in the number of users within three weeks. Such booming growth, Bilton says, “could signal a nascent desire for anonymity online.” Certainly the experiences of the reviewers above lend further evidence to the support of anonymity contributing to deviant social behavior online, but more broadly, the existence of sites such as Omegle and Chatroulette highlights the rhetorical possibilities and desires of modern Internet culture, even if it is not always acknowledged as such a desire. Additionally, the fact that blogs dedicated to Internet “safety” exist demonstrates the cultural importance placed upon communication carried out over computer networks.

### Rhetoric and Pronouns

Several of the theorists discussed earlier present their arguments from a rhetorical standpoint, as well. In terms of pronoun reform, Lakoff and Spender have the most to say directly regarding the rhetorical effect of such modification. That is, when authors consider the effect of a linguistic change on an audience, rhetorical theory is called into play.

Intentionality informs a significant portion of effecting change in language. If one is determined to force a change in the language, the best way to bring it about is to cause the change to be accepted. To be accepted, language must be used and propagated. Words such as the epicene *thon* failed in gaining acceptance, while the epicene *yo* has gained acceptance within a specific speaking community. In short, “if individuals change their language use, they will affect others and their change of pronoun will change their and others’ awareness” (Engelhardt 77).

The matter of intentionality is also evident in examining the difference between the third-person pronouns *he* and *she* used in similar sentences. Robin Lakoff tackles the difference

between audience interpretations of *he* and *she* in an analysis of one simple sentence in which the pronoun is the only change. The specific sentence, “He’s a professional,” should be “completely parallel semantically” with the sentence “She’s a professional” (59). Grammatically and syntactically, the sentences remain identical; however, as soon as *He* is replaced with *She*, the sentence, instead of suggesting a highly paid, pro-social vocation, has the capability of suggesting without any other context that “‘she’ is a prostitute, literally or figuratively speaking” (60). It is regrettable that such a simple change in the gender of the referent causes the sentence to descend to negative connotations, and it suggests significantly that a societal discrepancy remains and is reflected by the selection of gender in pronouns. Indeed, Lakoff argues, “It is realistic to hope to change only those linguistic uses of which speakers themselves can be made aware, as they use them” (71). That is, only by intentionally using and being consciously aware of the changes one chooses to implement can linguistic reform be remotely successful. Dale Spender comments on these rhetorical suggestions of Lakoff’s, adding her own thoughts to the subject by asserting that feminine-specific words convey to the audience “a shift to negative and sexual meanings” (19), or a conscious awareness of those negative and sexual connotations.

As discussed and exemplified in chapter 2, the feminist influence on pronouns can be seen in works not even directly related to the topic. Austin’s, Manovich’s, Beaufort’s, and others’ separate solutions to the generic-reference issue are all divergent, and each has a different and rhetorically significant outcome.

In addition, as briefly addressed in the second chapter, Engelhardt argues, “If the English teachers would make their students write *they* instead of *he*, the students would think about the reasons for the change of pronouns, and this thinking would result in the change of language

awareness” (78). Here again arise the concepts of intentionality and awareness; in a case in which one actually contemplates the reasons supporting a new usage, such a usage may in fact foster an awareness and consequent acceptance, much in alignment with Lakoff’s argument above.

### Awareness

Awareness, then, is a crucial, recurring factor in the interplay between producers of language (i.e., authors, speakers, or otherwise originators) and consumers of language (readers, listeners, or receivers). That is, the originator’s words are all the more effective when constructed with rhetorical situation in mind. This awareness also informs Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric presented above, for which rhetoric is an ability of a speaker to recognize (i.e., to be aware of) multiple avenues of persuasion in a situation. Applied to language reform, then, the recognition of an audience’s prior expectations of (as well as subsequent reactions to) chosen words or phrases is a fundamental piece in evaluating the effectiveness of any specific change.

### Rhetoric and Vocabulary

Vocabulary-focused reform is arguably the least rhetorically rigorous method of reform for writers. That is, in any rhetorical discourse relationship among an author, audience, and text involving a forced change in vocabulary, vocabulary is the least difficult class to consciously implement and understand for a writer, as opposed to pronoun- or language-focused methods of reform, both of which involve interfering with and being aware of a more deeply-set, almost subconscious region of one’s discourse. Vocabulary, unlike pronouns, is in more constant flux, and therefore more easily adaptable to change as words enter and leave the realm of common usage.

Referring back to Robin Lakoff's argument regarding parallel semantics in pronouns, it is important to note that she also applies the same argument to vocabulary. Specifically, just as *he* or *she* can be interpreted differently when replacing each other in an otherwise identical sentence, so Lakoff asserts that words such as *master* and *mistress*, when interchanged in the same sentence, evoke very different connotations, despite their being "male-female equivalents" (58). Such an argument further evidences the dichotomy between gendered words that, despite recurring efforts, continues to prevail in Modern English.

Just as with pronouns, an awareness of rhetorical situation is necessary when advancing or implementing reform attempts; expectations for vocabulary are intrinsic to a culture, and awareness of those expectations is necessary in order for one to be persuasive or effective in communication. Muscio, and to an extent Lakoff, advocate a particularly rhetorical vocabulary reform method in that she does not propose new words, but rather an altered attitude and perspective on words that are of particular insult to women in Modern English. By reclaiming the same words, through deliberate use in different contexts from what might be expected, Muscio argues, words that are currently considered socially unacceptable, insulting, or demeaning can be elevated and re-valued.

### Rhetoric and Artificial Language

Little research has gone explicitly into the rhetoric of constructed or artificial languages. What rhetoricians might say, however, is a topic worthy of inquiry here. Elgin's endeavors with Láadan offer a great deal of rhetorical interpretation regarding artificial language. Given the fact that Láadan has seen relatively more success than other attempts, it provides a unique platform from which one can explore the rhetorical effects of fabricated language. In possessing a prerequisite knowledge of English prior to Láadan, a speaker of necessity will notice that many

of the gender commonplaces of English, such as the masculine being the unmarked form (e.g. *mister* compared to *mistress*), are effectively reversed. One must add an *-id* suffix to a noun to make it masculine; otherwise, the noun is assumed to be feminine. Such a fact possesses rhetorical significance in that anyone who wishes to speak Láadan with grammatical and syntactical propriety must consciously become aware of and reverse commonplaces found in Modern English. Further, Elgin incorporated evidential morphemes to verb phrases in Láadan, in effect building in a rhetorical component to the language since speakers of Láadan “have to take responsibility for the validity of what they say” (Okrent), using morphemic features that do not exist in English. These morphemes tie back once more to awareness and intentionality. Elgin’s specific choice to include such morphemes as these evidential and masculine markers provides an indirect commentary on Modern English, showing that Elgin, in creating her language, felt that such features were lacking and deserved re-envisioning.



## CHAPTER 5: LANGUAGE REFORM AND WRITERS TODAY

As explored up to now, language reform has been the subject of much interest and debate for centuries in the Modern English language. The fields of feminism, linguistics, and rhetoric each bring to the discussion a perspective informed by the interests of the scholars whose research has contributed to the overall discussion. The three fields, however, do not exist as separate, unrelated entities. Indeed, rhetoric and feminism, like linguistics and feminism, have a nearly inextricable tie (evidence for Aristotle's assertion that rhetoric is inherent in all topics). The rise of feminist rhetoric as a specific area of inquiry is approximately coincident with the rise of first-wave feminism and the abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimké (Sloane 302). Feminist rhetors have had a further struggle in claiming their own territory due to the thorough domination not only of rhetoric, but of all academia by men for millennia. In his overview of feminist rhetoric, Thomas Sloane argues that women, especially in the generative years of the discipline, endured several cultural expectations working against them at once:

Qualities traditionally valued in rhetoric – assertiveness, leadership, rational argumentation, debating skills, and expertise – are associated with masculinity. Similarly, economic issues, military matters, legislating, and foreign relations, the common topics of deliberation, are thought of as the purview of men. In other words, those who engage in public discourse are expected to display qualities traditionally associated with masculinity and to discuss issues traditionally identified with men (303).

Thus, any performance in the public sphere by a woman was virtually a form of cross-dressing, making the acceptance of women as rhetors equally qualified as men a near impossibility for years. Women did not have an agency, and until they gained that agency, they were seen as encroaching upon the firmly established and sovereign territory of men. Through its evolution and gradual acceptance, feminist rhetoric has gained agency and a voice, and has recently concentrated on the recovery and re-valuing of the voices and practices of past women thinkers and speakers who, in their own times, had not received due recognition or otherwise been

afforded agency (307). Over time, then, the goals of feminist rhetors have changed just as have the goals of feminist activists, often causing the two to converge in their hopes for change. In fact, Sloane's summary definition of feminist rhetoric as "advocacy for women, analysis of patriarchy, a style of communicating, the recovery of women's voices, the extrapolation of theory from women's practice, and the development of critical methods responsive to the special conditions that women face as rhetors" (308) may at times be effectively indistinguishable from the goals of feminists who are not specifically identified as rhetors.

### Feminism and Reform

Feminism certainly shares a deep-rooted relationship with reform. By its very nature, feminism seeks to change societal interactions and perceptions, and language makes an obvious target for reform owing to its inextricable relationship with society. Second-wave feminists like Lakoff and Livia especially support a relativistic approach, whereby language can only change once the people who use it change. Especially in her discussion of words used more frequently by women, Lakoff states,

If it is agreed that this lexical disparity [between men's and women's language] reflects a social inequity in the position of women, one may ask how to remedy it. Obviously, no one could seriously recommend legislating against the use of the term "mauve" and "lavender" by women, or forcing men to learn to use them. All we can do is give women the opportunity to participate in the real decisions of life. (43)

In the case of color vocabulary, Lakoff is entirely certain that attempts to restrain women from using more specific terms than men tend to is as useless as forcing men to use those terms. Instead, she argues (with good reason, and with strong fidelity to her second-wave affiliation) that language should be less the topic of concern, with more emphasis placed on the ability of women to participate in decisions that can affect everyone; only by influencing change in society can a change in language occur. More recently, though, calls by feminists including Spender and

Muscio maintain a deterministic approach: their work attempts to reclaim subordinating vocabulary as a means to re-value and empower words that have become pejorative towards women. To determinists, reform can only be effectively achieved by forcefully changing the words that people use.

The persistence of masculine-heavy discourse in Modern English may in fact signify that language remains a method of continued subordination, as Dale Spender argues. If so, then those authors who have taken it upon themselves to employ linguistic role reversal, such as Lev Manovich does in *The Language of New Media*, are already attempting to subvert the dominant masculine paradigm of Modern English. Manovich's approach, however, is hardly widespread. Indeed, Ehrlich and King argue, "While androcentric language clearly reflects and reproduces sexist social structures and attitudes, the continuing existence of such structures and attitudes throws into question the possibility of successful language reform" (60). More writers and readers must exercise awareness in order to challenge any power, such as the one that *he* still holds, and effect reform. Since

[l]inguistic meanings are, to a large extent, determined by the dominant culture's social values and attitudes, ... terms initially introduced to be nonsexist, nonracist, or even feminist may (like a woman's response of "No" to a man's sexual advances) lose their intended meanings in the mouths and ears of a sexist, racist speech community and culture (60).

This loss of meaning is indeed what Muscio argues happened to words like *cunt* and *whore*.

The best hope for language reform from a feminist standpoint seems most likely to come not with a deterministic, but with a relativistic approach. Since the first wave, much reform has indeed been accomplished for the sake of equality, both in society as well as in language, though much still remains. Whereas J. L. Austin in the 1950s employed the generic *he* without second thought, more recent writers of the past several decades have approached the issue of a generic

antecedent with varied strategies, all of which challenge the long-standing reign of the masculine pronoun as generic..

### Rhetorical Implications

Language, then, and particularly Modern English, reflects the intricate interplay between contemporary culture and changing language practices, just as Begvall's Alice comes to realize and declare against her misogynistic professor in "Humpty Dumpty Does Syntax." But, where does that leave language reform? It sits between the two, at the intersection between culture and usage, and it is a significant indicator of where a culture places its ideological values. For centuries, many have argued the necessity of adopting a gender-neutral epicene pronoun, though arguably no consensus has been reached. Over time, however, the use of *they* to indicate an antecedent of uncertain or unmarked sex has worked its way into acceptable use. While one may still be cautioned to avoid such a solution in academic or professional writing (an indication of traditional grammar's stubbornness), *they* can still certainly be heard in everyday parlance. And why not? If someone wants to avoid assigning sex to an uncertain antecedent, should they not be able to do so with a single word that already exists in the language? That language will change is a constant, just as prescriptions to avoid changing it also remain constant. It is such prescriptions that deem the use of *they* unacceptable due to number disagreement or simple impropriety; nevertheless, such an epicene solution has inevitably become a social norm, as Balhorn, Meyers, Livia, Zuber and Reed, and Engelhardt all separately note. Its "dogged resistance" to eradication (Livia, *Pronoun* 137) further suggests that it may already be the epicene solution to gendered pronouns.

Part of the resistance to *they* as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun may be found by examining the resistance through a feminist lens. The long-standing prescription that number

agreement is of such high importance, especially before the twentieth century, may be attributed to a means of keeping women out of the dominance structure deeply codified within English.

The exclusion of *they* as an epicene solution is very much anti-feminist. By suggesting that *they* only agrees with third-person plural antecedents, grammarians effectively support, maintain, and perhaps even strengthen the patriarchal status quo by making the masculine *he* a simpler solution.

Language as a social construct bears a striking resemblance to technology as presented by feminist scholar Eileen Leonard, so much so that replacing the word *technology* with *language* in her description yields an adequate explanation of language's relationship to human society:

Rather than being an irreducible first cause or simply neutral, [technology/language] is largely a secondary phenomenon, a construct of society, socially shaped. In a sense it has been "chosen" and so have its implications since [technology/language] is always developed and implemented within a particular social context. Who designs it, who uses it, and why and when they do so are significant factors and have profound effects (15).

Within such a description, it might be argued that language is in fact a technology and thus fulfills the same arguments given by Leonard. As a social construct, it falls to the users and their social context to design and implement language, as well as to exercise an agency and awareness over the words they choose to employ in their own communication. By concentrating on and emphasizing choices in one's own use of language, more can ostensibly be achieved without facing resistance to arbitrary rules and reform attempts that will invariably lead to conflict. Policing others' language is seldom successful and often futile. This conclusion is not meant to be support of an anarchic "anything goes" approach; indeed, standards are important and necessary to maintain understandable interpersonal communication. The prescription of arbitrary rules regarding so-called "better" or "worse" solutions to perceived linguistic shortcomings, however, is fruitless.

So many of the previously discussed reform attempts have succeeded to varying degrees. In any of those cases, in order for people to adopt a specific change, they must undergo what might be called an *un-learning* process; that is, they must forget what is often considered a second-nature practice in order to implement a certain reform. For example, using *thon* or *he'er* as an epicene solution would require foregoing the conditioned urge to use *he*, *she*, or indeed *they*, instead replacing it consciously every time with the new word. English recently underwent such a change, as can be seen by the lack in Modern English of the familiar second-person singular *thou* and its forms, and indeed, the objective-case *whom* is occurring with far less frequency and regularity than even a century ago, undergoing a slow but gradual demise (Walsh). In cases such as these, comfort level (and, consequently, perpetuation of the status quo) inevitably plays a major role and likely contributes at least partially to the long maintenance of *he* as the third-person neutral pronoun.

What remains for writers then is to exercise agency in their selection of language and awareness in the implications those selections will have for any given audience. Grammar and usage handbooks aside, the most important prescriptions to follow are one's own personal recognitions and societal expectations. Handbooks rarely reflect common expectation; rather, they attempt to perpetuate systematic grammar prescriptions that are insufficient to cope with changing attitudes. More than any single specific method of reform, then, the most pertinent reform is our awareness over our own words. Further, by using words that question or even challenge societal presumption, one can take up the cause of reformers such as Inga Muscio and, indirectly, Suzette Elgin, without inviting dismissal on account of arbitrary vocabulary.

Conceptually, even artificial languages offer valuable ideas for writers: first, writers must pay attention to the community's language expectations, be it Modern English or Láadan.

Second, they must concentrate on the implications of their own choices rather than forcing those choices on other writers, concepts much too complex to be prescribed by straightforward rules in any usage handbook.

The reforms explored above inevitably create ramifications for all users of language. With either linguistic or cultural change comes the need to evaluate the rhetorical relationships among text, author, and audience. Every writer, then, must be aware of social perceptions, and choose their words accordingly.

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